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SUBJECT: A SNAPSHOT OF POVERTY IN BAKU

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Nasib Nassibli, an opposition MP and former Fulbright scholar, took PolOff on a tour of his constituency which includes some of Baku's poorest families. The squalor in which his constituents live often goes unnoticed as more attention often goes to IDPs, refugees, and orphans. However, these constituents, mostly day laborers who earn USD 2 per day, have retained their pride and are eager to find ways to make their government listen to them and help them. What they need is a strong advocate for their concerns, which they seem to have gotten by voting for Nassibli. While some residents told Nassibli how angry they were when it appeared he would boycott his seat, many welcomed his proposals to form neighborhood associations and to have him serve as their advocate before the Parliament. Nassibli has a large mandate to fulfill, but may be able to create the first wave of a more representative Parliament. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Nasib Nassibli, former two-time Fulbright scholar, opposition Musavat member, and first-time MP, offered PolOff a guided tour of parts of his Baku constituency. Nassibli's 38,000 constituents are among the poorest in Baku, on a level that likely approaches that of IDPs and refugees. Approximately 8,000 of his constituents live in dormitories they inhabited at the fall of the Soviet Union and have remained in ever since. They represent a largely forgotten population, as humanitarian assistance programs focused on the IDP and refugee community and Baku's elite profited from Azerbaijan's explosive, energy-driven GDP growth. While the average Azerbaijani salary of USD 125 per month may seem hard to believe in the midst of Baku's traffic jams of Mercedes and luxury SUVs, Nassibli's poorest constituents could only hope to the average salary of USD 125 per month.

¶3. (SBU) Many of the residents PolOff met work in the "slave markets," day labor markets where jobless gather to compete for jobs carrying concrete construction blocks or do other menial labor for a "shirvan" (USD 2) a day. (Ironically, the day labor they provide is often for the luxury high-rise apartments being constructed meters away from their dormitories.) Of the 100 or so residents PolOff met, few could say either they or their neighbors had permanent employment. The few women who did have permanent employment were teachers, most of whom probably only earn around USD 30 per month. While we met some men during our mid-afternoon trip, those at home were mostly women and children, some left behind as their husbands went off to seek work in Russia.

COMMUNAL SQUALOR

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¶4. (SBU) During Nassibli's tour, PolOff visited three dormitories in two different areas of the constituency, every building as bad as the one before. Families live in rooms about the size of US college dormitory rooms, or about 10 feet by 15 feet, with no built-in closet, kitchen, sink, or bathroom to call their own.

Apparently city regulations forbid residents from adding on to their living spaces by building enclosed balconies. The few rooms we saw had a bed in one corner, extra bedding in another, and perhaps a small wardrobe and desk. Families of three or four, at times up to six lived in these rooms. All facilities are communal and were in a common state of disrepair. On average six or seven families share a kitchen that usually has two gas stoves with ovens, a large sink, and a bathtub. The appliances appeared to be the original appliances from the dorms' opening in the 1960s and had not been cared for properly. It did not appear that families stored food in the kitchen, likely because the mold and rot due to dampness and leaking water pipes would ruin any stocks.

15. (SBU) Both the sight and the smell of the communal bathrooms would be enough to make anyone sick to their stomachs. There were no walls for privacy either for showers (which were rusty pipes with ancient shower heads) or for the toilets (two holes in the ground cut out of a ceramic overlay, complete with foot treads). While residents were embarrassed to show us their living quarters (only three or four actually allowed us in), they angrily showed us the bathrooms and kitchens, exclaiming "Look at this filth!"

16. (SBU) The physical infrastructure of the dormitories was all crumbling away from water seepage. Built of concrete in the 1960s, the buildings were maintained by the nearby factories in which the families worked during the Soviet Union. However, with the privatization of some of the factories but more often their closure, no one actually bears responsibility for the maintenance of the buildings. Utilities are supplied by the state companies and citizens have applied to the local government official (ExCom) for repair work, but to little avail. Residents periodically endure having water only every other day and gas and electricity outages for days. Utility companies can shut off the

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electricity to the entire building if only half the residents pay, because there is no system to individually bill or individually supply utilities. Stairwells are rickety, basements routinely flood, and no one appears to take the initiative to clean common areas, such as throwing away cigarette butts on landings. A few feet outside the door of one of the dorms was a manhole for the sewer system; the ground around it flooded with raw sewage that the residents say they have been trying to get addressed for years.

DEMOCRACY NOT LOST ON THE POOR

17. (SBU) The squalid conditions in which Baku's poor live, some for more than 30 years, have certainly taken their toll on the community. Most were frustrated and angry at their lack of ability to change their environment and were tired of being ignored. When Nassibli introduced himself as their MP, the residents flocked to him and unleashed a litany of grievances. Nassibli encouraged residents to collectively advocate for their rights to improve their living conditions. Residents jumped at the chance to organize into neighborhood associations and welcomed Nassibli's leadership. One woman visiting a friend was visibly frustrated when she discovered her building was not in Nassibli's constituency and that she would not be able to partake in the meetings. Nonetheless, Nassibli offered to deliver a letter from her to her MP.

18. (SBU) Most of the residents grew up under the Soviet system and while most had little sense of empowerment, they understood the role their local government should take and that local government could be spurred to action. One building decided to block roads a few weeks prior to our visit to protest the electricity shortage. While a representative of the ExCom's office came out to address their concerns and promised a resolution, the residents claim the office now ignores their phone calls to explain that problems still persist.

19. (SBU) Clearly, the residents with whom we spoke had a strong

sense of what democracy should look like in practice. After Nassibli introduced himself, one middle-aged man yelled at him, saying how angry he was when he heard Nassibli was considering boycotting Parliament. The man accused him of not being accountable to his constituents and said his vote for Nassibli would have been wasted. He went out on a limb to vote for Nassibli, why wouldn't his MP do the same for him? Others around him nodded in agreement. Nassibli (who back in December had said he wanted to take his seat but would have to defer to Musavat leadership) took the comments in stride and said that he was officially their MP now and was here among them to work for them.

¶10. (SBU) Expectations among Baku's poor seemed tempered by reality. None seemed to expect that their country's coming wealth would significantly change their lot. Nassibli did not ask his constituents their thoughts on the levels of government corruption or their expectations for the oil money. Instead, he focused on means of empowering those to whom he visibly felt a responsibility. It was evident that the main task at hand for the residents was to survive and to provide for their families in whatever way they could, without losing their pride. One mother insisted that her children continue attending school, despite the fact that other children teased and tormented the boy about being a "dorm kid."

#### TOWARDS A MORE REPRESENTATIVE PARLIAMENT?

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¶11. (SBU) Baku's poor, the class of citizens that drives the average monthly salary down to USD 125 a month, is often forgotten in the rush to improve conditions in schools, orphanages, and IDP housing. While rural Azerbaijanis can survive off the land, urban dwellers have few choices beyond day labor in an economy that is still heavily dominated by the oil sector. Anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that this class of urban poor is growing. The test of the new MPs such as Nassibli is whether their advocacy and efforts can move the mountains necessary to improve conditions for these constituents. This can be accomplished through pushing local government to be more accountable, passing legislation to boost the non-oil sector economy, and teaching constituents self-empowerment. While he does not appear to have a lot of company in his efforts, MPs such as Nassibli may slowly be able to chip away at the old "rubber stamp" system. We are looking to MPs such as Nassibli to produce positive civic changes that may at one point turn Parliament into a representative body.

HARNISH